

Oh No! Do I Have to Have THAT Conversation?



Our leadership role requires that we give consistent and regular feedback all year long. **That is our right and our responsibility.**

Many leaders care deeply about their employees but when it comes to delivering tough feedback, their compassionate natures often over rule their obligation. Bold and direct leaders say exactly what is on their minds to employees, but they lack compassion when delivering the feedback. Neither of those approaches is effective.

The best feedback conversations are rooted in a dialogue between the supervisor and employee that establishes a path for improvement and the supportive encouragement to make changes stick. A dialogue is a product of an established relationship with the employee that leverages the trust that has already been established.

Feedback conversations require three things:

- **A desire to do good**
- **Skills**
- **Strategies**

Why it Matters

We regularly hear this comment from experienced leaders when we ask them what they would tell their younger selves about managing people: “Have the important conversations. Make sure your employees know what you expect of their performance and behavior.”

When we ask the same leaders what prevented them from doing that earlier in their careers, their answer is often something like: “I just didn’t know how to do it, didn’t know what to say or when to say it. So, I either avoided it or did it very badly.”

A Desire to Do Good

Paul Falcone states in his book, *101 Tough Conversations to have with Employees*, that the goal is:

“... to treat people with dignity and respect at all times, even through the discipline and termination process, when needed.”

Some rules of engagement are helpful when thinking about this process.

1. The first one is that it is not simply what you say but how you say it that counts.
If we demonstrate respect and compassion, even in the most uncomfortable workplace situations, the outcomes are likely to be positive.
2. Whatever we want for ourselves, we need to be willing to give to our employees. Honesty must be the basis for the conversations. People are going to have differing viewpoints and opinions but making it into a confrontation in the negative sense does not have to be an option.
3. Regardless of the content of our feedback, speaking in a respectful and thoughtful tone allows employees to consider taking responsibility for their own actions. We can choose to be both firm and respectful.

Truth #1.

People don’t repeat behavior unless it is rewarded.
(Truth #1.5. Ignoring poor performance is rewarding it.)

Truth #2.

People don’t spontaneously improve on their own without feedback from managers.

Truth #3.

Managers get the performance and the behaviors we tolerate or reward.

WORDS MATTER.

WHAT you say,

WHEN you say it

And HOW

Your message is delivered

DRIVES RESULTS

The following reframing of comments to employees provides examples of how this can be accomplished.

What NOT to Say:

“You can’t keep coming in late every other day. Who do you think you are?”

A better option is:

“Our team is counting on you being at work at 8:00 to answer the phones. That is my expectation as well. If there are good reasons for your chronic tardiness, we can discuss them. If not, I expect you to be here on or before 8:00 a.m. everyday.”

What NOT to Say:

“Your attitude toward the administrative assistants is rude!”

A better option is:

“There is a perception that you are often angry or frustrated with the administrative assistants. Our values support respectful communication and that means with everyone. Can you tell me your point of view so I can understand what is going on? I’d like for us to resolve this together so that behaviors change as soon as possible.”

What NOT to Say:

*“Your work is sloppy,
you forget to follow up
with me, and you lose*

A better option is:

“I’m very concerned about what I’m seeing in terms of the quality of your work. There appears to be a lot of open work orders on your desk and the ones I’ve returned to you with my signature have not been followed up on. Please help me understand what is going on and if there is anything I need to do to help you. This needs to change immediately, so let’s figure out a solution.”

In summary, if you approach any feedback conversation from the ***desire to do good***, the outcomes are going to improve simply because the employee senses that you care about their well-being and success.

Skill

Supervisors who are very skilled at providing feedback use some framework or model that works best for them and is easy to remember.

Since employees may be unpredictable in their reactions to constructive performance feedback, managers must also think through the “what ifs” before they have a feedback conversation, so they are proactive in handling strong emotions.

A very easy to remember model is the **SBI** framework. In preparing for the feedback conversation, ask yourself:

1. What is the situation I want to discuss? [**S**]
2. What behaviors have I observed that support my reason for this feedback? [**B**]
3. What is the impact if this behavior does not change? [**I**]

Consider this situation:

You manage a team of five. Several months ago, you hired Jaden fresh out of college. He is creative, energetic, and social.

However, you've also noticed that his work ethic is suboptimal compared to the other team members. Jaden likes to have fun, talking to his colleagues often, and on his phone quite a bit.

The other team members are expending double the effort to get things done and they are starting to resent Jaden's frequent interruptions just to tell them a joke or share something he saw on the Internet.

S – What is the situation?

Jaden is not pulling his weight on the team and his work pace is significantly slower than his co-workers.

B – What are the behaviors?

He spends time on interactions not related to work. He misses deadlines. He interrupts his colleagues who are deeply focused on their work to tell them jokes.

I – What is the impact?

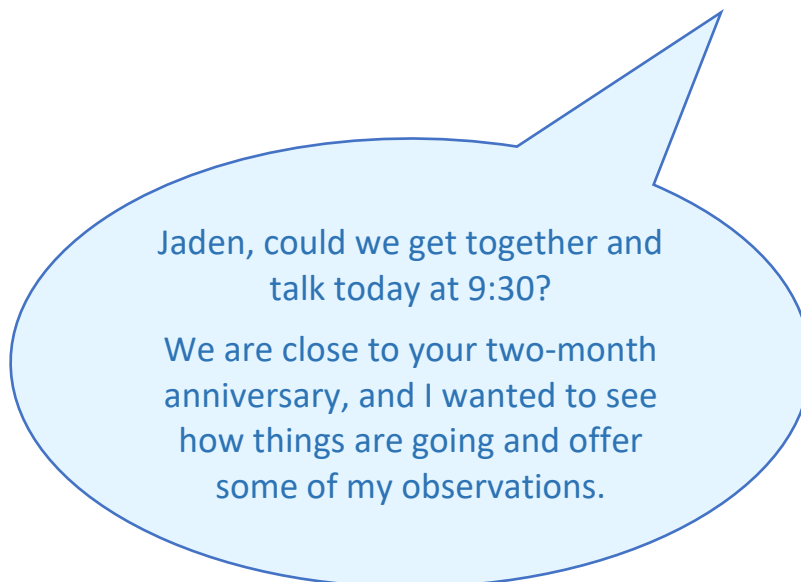
The team is having to work double time to meet their goals. Many are waiting on Jaden to finish something long past the deadline. It is creating friction on the team.

What are some of the possible reactions Jaden might have to the feedback?

Surprise, anger, or silence.

Request a meeting with Jaden by setting as neutral a tone as possible.

The SBI conversation might go something like this:



SITUATION

Jaden, thank you for meeting with me. I know we are close to your two-month anniversary, and I wanted to see how you think things are going and also offer some of my observations. What has been your biggest challenge so far? So, it sounds like you enjoy the team and the projects you are working on and I'm glad to hear that. I want to share with you from my vantage point what I am seeing and hearing. I know this is your first job out of college and you are working in a very fast-paced environment here.

BEHAVIOR

I'm concerned that you are not hitting your deadlines and that you spend quite a bit of time talking about non-work-related topics with your co-workers. For example, I overheard you talking last week with Larry about the World Cup and when I came back ten minutes later you were still talking with him about it. This morning you spent a half hour walking around talking with your co-workers about the Netflix series you have been watching.

Are you aware of this behavior? I'd like to try to understand your perspective.

Wait for his answer!

Then ask for clarification, if needed. The goal is to see if he has any insight into his behavior.

TAKE IT BACK TO IMPACT!

The impact this has on the team is very concerning to me. Many of them are having to either wait on you to provide them with the information they need to move forward, or they are going ahead and finding the information on their own.

Lastly, Sum It Up!

"This creates a very unequal work load distribution. As a team we count on each other to keep our commitments. I'm equally worried about the tension it is creating on our team."

NEXT ask how Jaden sees the situation.

Can you help me understand what is going on from your perspective?

Watch for his feelings!

Jaden may seem shocked and move to defend his actions. He may not take any responsibility or show any insight into his behavior.

Then address his feelings.

Jaden, I see that this comes as a shock to you and that you don't think it is a fair assessment.

SET YOUR EXPECTATIONS

I expect the following things to change. It's your responsibility to understand what work is needed on each project and when it is due to your co-workers. Do your work quickly and accurately and offer to help everyone else around you.

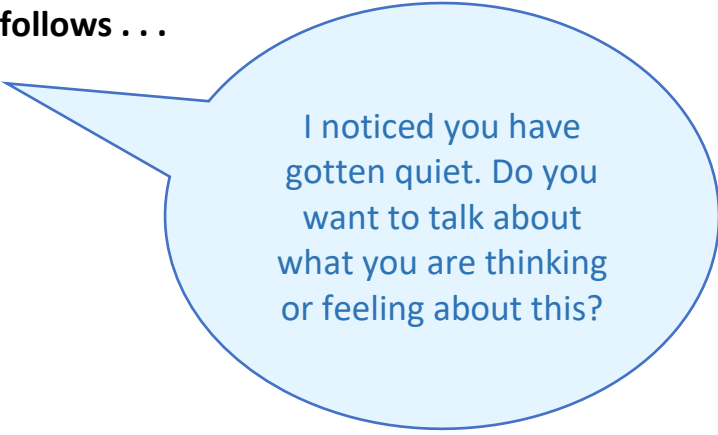
SET A TIMELINE

By the end of this week, let's talk about your plan for completing the past-due tasks and how you are going to support Ellen on the project she leads.

CLARIFY THE BEHAVIOR YOU EXPECT

I want to see you being cordial and friendly but also respectful of your very busy co-workers' time. This means you will want to save non-work related topics for breaks, lunch or after-hours.

Hurt silence follows . . .




I noticed you have gotten quiet. Do you want to talk about what you are thinking or feeling about this?

Watch for his attitude!

It just seems very unfair, you know? Like you are picking on me because I'm the newbie...

Address his feelings with your values

These expectations are ones that I have for everyone, Jaden, and as you can see, we have a very high-performing team. My hope is that you will be performing at their level in the very near future. Right now, you are not performing at an acceptable level.



Are you willing to improve with my support and coaching?

Yes, I really need this job.

I'm happy to hear that. The next steps are getting me your plan by Friday at noon outlining how you will get back on track. Over the next month, I'd like to meet with you on Monday morning and Friday afternoon to check in on your progress and see if you need my help with anything.

How does that sound?

Thank you for the conversation and if you think of any other ways that *I can help you be successful*, please bring it up at our next meeting.

Strategy

Performance topics can have a complex history, involve interactions with very difficult employees, or address delicate topics and require significant preparation prior to the conversation because of the intended or unintended consequences inherent in them.

There are higher stakes involved, emotions tend to run high, and the impact is critical.

It is helpful to have a strategy that is manageable for these conversations. Breaking the process into three phases provides managers with the time to reflect, to become crystal clear about the impact, and to explore their own emotions that might be triggered because of chronic poor performance or behavior or involving a topic that is uncomfortable to discuss (e.g. hygiene).

Phase 1: Reflection

You decide to hold a crucial conversation with an employee with whom you have a strained relationship, or the employee may be very difficult or have a history of poor communication, confrontation or whose views seem to be diametrically opposed to the expectations you have for performance.

You won't be able to control how the difficult employee is going to respond, but you can control how you respond by going in with an intentional mindset and a commitment to setting the most effective emotional tone for the conversation. This means understanding your own set of triggers, your early warning signals that you are about to react and putting your ego in neutral.

Be prepared to mean what you say and to say it as neutrally as possible without sugar coating the message and without blunt-force statements.

Remember your desire is to do “good,” and bring that intention with you into the conversation, it will help you step into the conversation calmly and confidently. There are always two sides to every story. Recognizing and acknowledging that enables you to create a space for people with vastly opposing points of view to come together and sort the facts out to collaborate on an improvement plan.

Visualize how you would like the conversation to go. It may not go exactly the way you visualize, but the exercise often provides the most vivid roadmap for success.

Reflection Questions

FIRST, think through these questions before you craft your starter statement.

- When will I ask for this conversation? Where should it be?
- Have I gathered all the facts and information I need to support my feedback?
- Have I contributed to this situation by miscommunication, not being clear, not addressing it in a timely fashion or some other way?
- What are some possible reactions the employee might have to the performance feedback and how will I respond?
- What does improvement look like, and can I describe it vividly for the employee?
- What am I prepared to do to monitor and support improvement?
- Am I clear about the negative impact this will have on my department or team if nothing improves?
- What does my starter statement communicate? Is it too long or too short? Is it focusing on behaviors?

During the Conversation

You have a starter statement, a meeting and a location confirmed, so what now?

Your intention is to create a positive space where dialogue can occur. This will likely take effort since most employees know what it feels like to have “the talk,” and are already a bit on edge or afraid. That’s why your starter statement should be as neutral and fact driven as possible. Here are a few examples:

Scenario 1: Grumpy Andy

Andy, thanks for meeting with me. I want to talk about something that might feel a bit uncomfortable and see how we can figure out a solution that is good for our team.

We have talked several times over the last six months about improving your productivity and you have worked diligently on that. What I want to talk about now is your impact on your team’s productivity.

They have noticed and I have observed that most mornings you come into the office without greeting anyone, sit down at your desk and sigh very loudly, throw your keys or cell phone on the table, and then put your head in your hands.

When your co-workers approach you, you keep your head in your hands and curtly ask them not to bother you. The message you are sending to all of us is that you don’t want to be a part of the team and are unhappy about being at work.

This makes for an unpleasant work environment and co-workers are afraid to talk to you about joint work projects.

This has a very negative impact on how we achieve our goals, and it must change. **Are you aware of this vibe you are communicating?**

Scenario 2: Uncivil Bridget

Bridget, I'd like to talk about what I've observed as rude and uncivil comments that you make to certain team members.

I've very concerned about this because it is not how I expect team members to behave. We value respectful and civil interactions.

I'm also concerned because it seems you are targeting a few individuals to receive this treatment while being collegial with the other folks on our team.

A couple of specific examples are yesterday in the break room you told Jason he was a moron because he was fumbling with the coffeemaker and spilled the grounds. Last week you snatched a folder out of Sarah's hands and told her you would finish the report because she couldn't be trusted to do it correctly.

Help me understand from your point of view what is going on when you interact with Jason and Sarah with incivility.

I really do want to understand, and I also want to be clear that these behaviors are inappropriate, and I won't tolerate anyone on our team being spoken to in that manner.

In terms of process, the starter statement should only take five minutes or less to deliver. It should be to the point and succinctly clear about the situation, the behaviors and the impact.

Deliver your Starter Statement in less than 5 minutes.

Then SILENCE!

After you make your statement, be silent. Yes – silent!

Really (deeply) listen to their story.
Ask questions to understand
their perspective.

You want to give the employee time to digest your words or divulge their reaction.

Paraphrase what you've heard.
Restate your expectations for
change and improvement.

When the employee is ready, allow them to tell their story without interrupting – even if they need to vent slightly. When they finish telling their side of the story, ask follow-up questions or clarify any points you heard that seemed confusing. Your goal at this stage is to make sure you have truly listened and can see their perspective – while not necessarily agreeing with it. This is helpful so that dialogue can continue and the employee feels you are genuinely listening and trying to understand.

When you feel you fully grasp the employee's reasons, restate your expectations for change and improvement.

For example, "Bridget, I hear that you are frustrated with what you see are attitudes of entitlement from Jason and Sarah. You are also resentful that you've worked here 8 years and they have been here less than one year and you perceive they are getting the good projects. ***Did I understand that correctly?***"

If there is a lack of agreement about your summary, try it again. Once the employee agrees that you've understood the situation from their viewpoint, restate what you want to see.

Try again until you both agree on your
summary of the situation.
Be sure the employee understands.

"Bridget, I can see how you might be resentful. My expectation, though, is that regardless of how you are feeling, your words and actions must demonstrate respect and civility. It is okay to disagree with others, but it is never okay to call people names or to roughly snatch things out of their hands and demean them." ***Do you understand what I'm expecting?***"

Problem Solving or Action Planning

The next step is to move to problem-solving or action planning – we can't undo the past, but we can put strategies in place for the future.

As often as possible, the **solutions should come from the employee**, unless there are specific compliance or safety requirements not being met. In which case, the solution is, well, total compliance to the standard, *no excuses*.

Circle Back

Ask Bridget, “What are some ideas you have for improving your communication with Jason and Sarah and showing respect to them?”

Be prepared to offer concrete actions, if needed, and actions that will be observable to others. Your goal is behavior change that sticks!

Before ending the conversation, the last step is scheduling check-ins to follow up on progress or for more coaching for the employee.

Depending on the severity of the behavior or performance, you should be meeting with the employee working on improvement at least once a week until you see changes. Then, you can follow that with monthly check-ins and conversations about what is working well and what isn't, and how you might be able to support them.

Follow-up until you see a change!

Success...

Everyone gets a behavior change that sticks.